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The Construction of Ethnoreligious Identity Groups in Syria:  
Loyalties and Tensions in the Syrian Civil War

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Anthropology  
Bridgewater State University

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## **Abstract**

The ongoing civil war in Syria is characterized by its inherent complexity, often leaving non-Syrian onlookers and geopolitical stakeholders confused and fatigued. In a war with such a high human toll—refugees hemorrhaging from Syria’s borders, the death toll ever-climbing, and a generation of children growing up with the fighting—there is no room for mystification. This research project contextualizes the Syrian Civil War using anthropological concepts of religion and ethnicity. The ways in which religion and ethnicity help construct identity and group loyalty among Syria’s diverse population are examined. In particular, the role of membership in specific identity groups in creating difference and drawing group boundaries are examined. Primary data in the form of semi-structured interviews are combined with secondary research drawing upon anthropological theory, ethnography, and historical literature. This study shows how group boundary construction is an organic result of war, but also reveals how group differences can be deliberately highlighted by conflict stakeholders in order to codify or redefine inter-factional relationships. Through an intimate understanding of how group identity construction and reconstruction can be used as a tool of war, the international community will be able to anticipate further developments in Syria, thus directing attention to conflict mediation, negotiation, and peacebuilding efforts.

## **Introduction**

This paper explores the dual expression of ethnicity and religion as essential features of individual and group identity construction in the Middle East. The result has been a collection of distinct “ethnoreligious” groups. The term “ethnoreligious” as used herein refers to the overlap of ethnicity and religion in the formation of in Syria. In exploring the Syrian Civil War from an

ethnoreligious perspective, this does not assume that ethnicity and religion are the sole factors for identity-construction or group membership. Other cultural features, including region, class, gender, race, and national affiliation, all play important roles in the formation of Syrian factions. Christa Salamandra characterizes Syria as, “a country which presents a complex array of crosscutting, overlapping, and often interdependent religious, class, regional, and ethnic identities” (2004: 7). As this paper will show, religious and ethnic loyalties are both deeply held and highly valued, but they foster the real potential for inter-group conflict.

During the Syrian uprising and subsequent ongoing civil war, ethnic and religious groups have played a critical role in defining the parameters of the conflict, and ethnoreligious affiliations have been used to define friends from foes. While ethnoreligious boundary construction can be seen as an organic result of war, group loyalties have also been manipulated, principally by Syrian leadership under Bashar al-Assad, as a strategy utilized by ethnic elites to ensure the survival of the Syrian regime. One result of such measures has been the reformulation of ethnoreligious boundaries.

Syrian national identity was historically organized around the secular and pan-Arab Ba’th ideology that deemphasized intra-Arab ethnoreligious divisions, effectively unifying Arab<sup>1</sup> Syrians. Although Rabinovich (2011: 161) argued that the Ba’thist Assad regime has feigned its commitment to Arab nationalism since taking power in 1970, it still relied upon an Arab nationalist framework to retain legitimacy. Since the Arab Spring spread to Syria in February 2011, the Arab nationalist framework was disposed of in favor of an exclusionary minoritarian ethnic solidarity. The demise of Arab nationalism fostered the breakup of a nation and gave rise to other loyalties based in particular on ethnic and religious membership.

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<sup>1</sup> Mainly Alawites, Druzes, and Christians are considered here; these ethnoreligious groups are traditionally and have historically been considered to be non-Arab. After Syrian independence and the rise of the Ba’th Party, however, these distinctions were reformulated and such groups were included in the Arab framework.

Close analysis of the war in Syria shows that ethnicity can be inchoate and adaptive, and may serve as a laboratory to apply Fredrik Barth's (1969) and other ethnic and ethnic boundaries concept. For example, Syria's ethnic boundaries have been rearranged in distinct ways, with the result that ethnic boundaries between groups have been variously maintained, constructed, or effectively erased. Ethnic boundary maintenance has occurred between the Kurds and all other ethnoreligious groups, despite attempts by non-Kurdish ethnic stakeholders to sway the group to one side or another. The construction of ethnic boundaries between majority Sunnis and Syria's various Arab minorities has given rise to the main source of conflict in the Syrian Civil War. The following pages will examine the origins and effects of conflicts among Syria's diverse ethnoreligious factions, including majority Sunnis and the many ethnoreligious minorities

This study also seeks to demystify the conflict in Syria by thoroughly exploring the ethnoreligious groups, emerging divisions, alliances, and the motivations of conflict stakeholders. Due to its inherent complexity, the events of Civil War—and their implications—are frequently misinterpreted or misunderstood by non-Syrians analyzing the conflict. In particular, the Syrian Civil War has been repeatedly described or represented in melodramatic and dichotomized terms—a bifurcated struggle “between the evil, brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad and noble freedom fighters” seeking democratic reforms (Carpenter 2013: 1). Elsewhere the struggle for Syria is also portrayed as a binary conflict between two diametrically opposite forces: government loyalists versus rebels, Syrian people versus the regime, Islamists versus secularists, Syrian citizens versus terrorists, or majority versus minority. The reality is much more complex and imprecise.

This binary and oppositional rhetoric does very little to explain the situation; in fact, in oversimplifying Syrian groups and their loyalties, conflict observers only further muddle foreign

understanding of an already complex conflict. Further, employing dichotomized language has a number of potentially dire consequences, from the legitimization of brutality to the dehumanization of whole groups of people. The confusion surrounding the Syrian civil war stems from general misunderstandings about Syria in general. Stephen Starr writes that, “for a long time Syria has been a country more feared than understood” (2012: 2).

Another aspect of this study will be to raise awareness about the tragic human toll caused by the ongoing war. As Lynch et al. (2014) shows, the Syrian Civil War is the most socially-mediated war in history, with Syrian stakeholders—including armed fighters, civilians, and members of the Syrian diaspora—taking an active role trying to keep the war in the headlines through social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Yet after three years of conflict, global sentiments remain characterized by inaction and apathy. By deconstructing the role of ethnoreligious loyalties in the Syrian Civil War, this study seeks to initiate a substantive global dialog about Syria’s more immediate future.

In this study, primary data in the form of semi-structured and informal interviews have been combined with secondary research in anthropological theory, ethnography, conflict journalism, and historical literature. A total of five interviews were conducted, either in person or over the telephone with Syrian-Americans, members of the Syrian diaspora, and Syrian activists or opposition members. Stakeholders in the Greater Boston area were first asked about their own background in order to establish a connection to Syria. They were then requested to share their opinions regarding Syrian national unity, ethnoreligious affiliation, group relationships, and the Syrian Civil War. In addition to interviews and secondary research, online social media sites including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter were accessed in order to keep current with the unfolding events in Syria.

Part One will investigate the background of the current Syrian conflict, including Syria's history in a context of ethnoreligious diversity. Part Two describes interview subjects and situates them in the context of the Civil War. Part Three will detail the principle findings of this study. Finally, Part Four will offer some concluding thoughts.

### **Part One: Background**

The modern state of Syria did not exist prior to 1920. Before then, the term "Syria" referred more generally to a larger region known by many different names. These nomenclatures defining the region reflect Syrian historical importance across a shifting cultural context. For many archaeologists and historians, Syria is located in what once was the Fertile Crescent, a region including Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, and the Nile River Delta in Egypt (Shoup 2008: 9). The name "Syria" was first used by the Greeks, and was historically designated as the region between Egypt and Anatolia. According to classical and modern Arab geographers, Syria is part of a larger region called the "Levant" or *Bilad al-Sham* (the country on the left) (Petran 1972: 17). While a precise definition of the region's boundaries have varied over time, *Bilad al-Sham* usually refers to the territory of modern day Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Hatay Province of Turkey (see Figure 1, below). Another term, *Suriya al-Kubra* (Greater Syria) has taken on important political meaning in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century Syrian nationalism (Shoup 2008: 2). Considering the fluidity of interlocking terms, the history and culture of modern Syria cannot be isolated from that of its modern state neighbors.

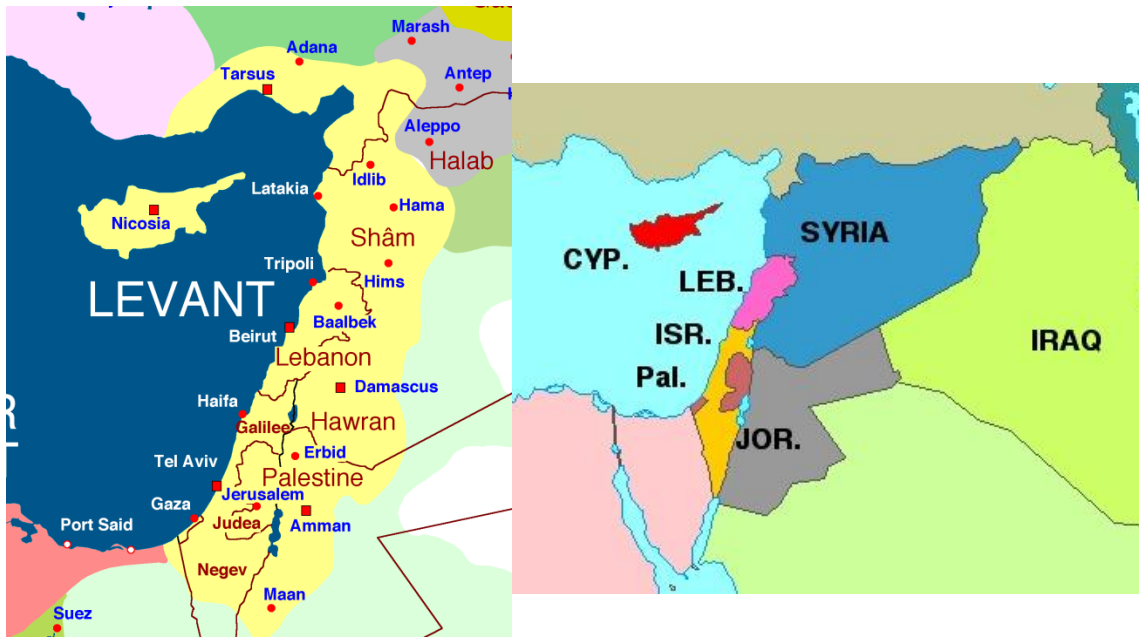


Figure 1. The region of Syria (left) compared to the modern geopolitical reality (right)

(Izady 2014)

Widespread human urban settlement of Syria began around the fourth millennium B.C.E. Some of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, such as Damascus and Aleppo, are located there (Shoup 2008: 9). Since the rebel alliance initiated the Battles for Damascus and Aleppo in mid-2012, many areas of the two cities have been turned to rubble. This level of destruction and turmoil is not entirely unprecedented, however. Syria has served as an important crossroads between Europe, Africa, and Asia, and thus was strategically important as empires expressed power over the region. Concurrently, Syria has experienced a seemingly endless succession of invasions first recorded in the Bronze Age. Many foreign invaders have ruled Syria—Hittites and Hurrians, Hyksos and Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians, Persians and Philistines, Greeks and Romans, Arabs, European Crusaders, Mongols, and Turks have at one time established themselves in all or part of Syria (Petran 1972: 25). These invasions have not occurred in a vacuum. Rather, Syria has been shaped by the historical reality of frequent



invasion, occupation, and incorporation into various empires. Although the devastation brought by the civil war in Syria is certainly staggering, the region's inhabitants have historically experienced war and destruction not entirely unlike today's conflict. In addition to exporting destruction to Syria, the many historical invaders and occupiers also offered a diversity of cultures.

The many conquerors of the region represent diverse cultures, religions, and ethnicities. While many of these cultures are no longer actively represented in modern Syria, their impact is intricately woven throughout the nation's cultural landscape. For instance, the Grand Mosque in Damascus embodies Syria's historical diversity. One of the oldest and largest mosques in the world, the Grand Mosque was constructed in the eighth century by the Umayyad Caliphate. Prior to being a mosque, the site was a center for worship for cultures dating back to 1000 B.C.E.—it was the Christian basilica of Saint John the Baptist, a Roman temple of Jupiter, and an Aramean temple to Haddad (Habeeb 2001: 1).

Six official UNESCO World Heritage sites are located in Syria—the Ancient City of Damascus, Site of Palmyra (Tamdur), Ancient City of Bosra (Deraa), Ancient City of Aleppo, Crac des Chevaliers and Qal'at Salah El-Din, and Ancient Villages of northern Syria. An additional twelve sites have been nominated to become UNESCO World Heritage sites. In June 2013, all six official UNESCO World Heritage sites were categorized as endangered (United Nations 2013). Chulov (2014) shows that many of these sites have already suffered extensive and perhaps irreparable damage including Al-Madina Souk and Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo (see Figure 2, below).



Figure 2. Photographs from Chulov (2014) depicting damages to Al-Madina Souk (left) and Umayyad Mosque (right)

The Middle East is often incorrectly perceived as a monolithic ethnoreligious zone, framed in the historical context of Sunni Arab domination, minority persecution, and factors leading to the “Arabization” of disparate groups. Such a context has created a dynamic whereby various permutations of identity are often subsumed under the Sunni Arab heading (Nisan 1991: 4–5). Though Sunni Arabs inhabit a majority position in many Middle Eastern countries, a wide range of ethnoreligious minorities have either lived in Syria since time immemorial or have found refuge inside Syria during the historic period (Shoup 2008: 1).

In this context, the modern state of Syria is considered by many to be an Arab state. Known officially as the Syrian Arab Republic, the country played an important role in the development of pan-Arab nationalism after the Ba’th Party seized power in 1963 (Nyrop et al.

1971: 131). Syria is proudly referred to by its citizenry as *Qala'at al-'Arubah* (the Bastion of Arabism) (Shoup 2008: 5).

With so much emphasis given to the Arab properties of Syria and the Middle East, one might easily overlook Syria's non-Arab qualities. Despite a great measure of cultural uniformity and poignant Arabness, Syria is characterized by strong religious and ethnic diversity (Van Dam 1979: 15). In fact, Syria is referred to by Margaret Hermann as one of the most heterogeneous nations in the entire Middle East (Hermann 1988: 71). Carleton Coon classically wrote that "the mosaic of peoples [is] the most conspicuous fact about Middle Eastern civilization" (Nisan 1991: 3). Though Salamandra (2004: 33) ultimately criticizes Coon's mosaic metaphor as "ahistoric and static," she concedes that it "accurately conveys the region's diversity and complexity."

Carleton Coon's mosaic of peoples manifests itself in Syria with a diversity of ethnoreligious groups—Arabs, Kurds, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Alawites, Isma'ilis, Druzes, Christians, and many more. Even though Syria is characterized by such heterogeneity, the regional context of Sunni Arab domination is palpable. As Syria's official language (as well as the language of the Qu'ran), Arabic is spoken by 82.5 percent of Syrians. In terms of language and religion, 68.7 percent of Syrians are Sunni Muslim, and Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims constitute 57.4 percent of the total population (Van Dam 1979: 15). Though Sunni Arabs certainly compose the majority of Syrians, the ethnoreligious diversity of Syria is substantial.

Religious minorities in Syria include Christians, Alawis, Druzes, Isma'ilis, and Yazidis. Ethnic minorities include the Kurds, Armenians, Turcomans, Circassians, and Shishans (Shoup 2008: 6–48). Several waves of Palestinian refugees also fled to Syria in recent political history, following the foundation of Israel. Prior to Syria's existing refugee crisis, 10.5 percent of all

Palestinian refugees worldwide lived in Syria, and 3 percent of all Syrian residents were Palestinian (Borneman 2007: xx). In the Syrian Civil War, all groups have been touched by the violence. The largest ethnoreligious groups—Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Kurds, and Druzes—have been the most important in ongoing conflict (See Figure 3, below).

### *Ethnoreligious Composition*

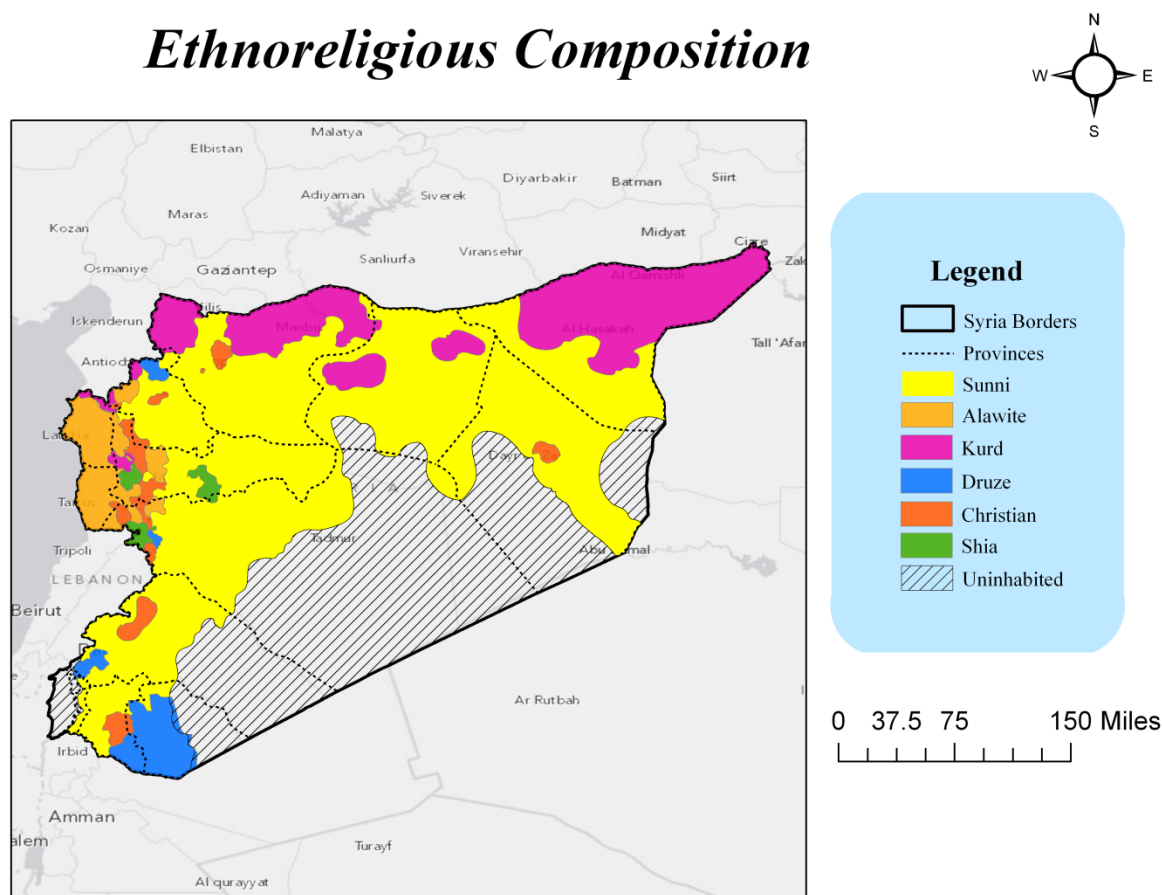


Figure 3. This map (Rousseau 2013, adapted from Izady 1997–2014) depicts the spatial distribution of ethnoreligious groups in Syria.

Because Syria does not officially collect ethnic and religious group census data and Syrians are not asked to identify themselves based on these categories (Starr 2012: 54), the actual distribution of these groups is contested. According to Lesch (2012: 51) and Starr (2012: 2),

Syria is 75 percent Sunni Muslim. Enders (2012) states that Syria is 70 percent Sunni Muslim Arab and Heydemann (2013: 64) evidences that Syria is 65 to 70 percent Sunni Arab. Much of the difference in figures relates to the distinction between Sunni Muslim and Sunni Arab Muslim—“Sunni Muslim” is only a religious classification while “Sunni Arab Muslim” is an ethnoreligious classification, excluding non-Arab Sunni Kurds.

The number of minority groups is also debated. Alawites number anywhere from ten percent (Enders 2012) to 12 percent (Borneman 2007: xix). At its lowest estimation, Christians make up “no more than 8 percent” (Petran 1972: 28), but Carpenter (2013: 1) claims they make up as much as 12 percent. A more widely cited figure is ten percent (Lesch 2012: 51, Starr 2012: 2, Enders 2012). The number of Kurds is difficult to estimate because of their historical marginalization. Starr (2012: 35) estimates that Syrian Kurds comprise about ten percent, while Heydemann (2013: 64) gives a range of ten to 12 percent. Finally, the Druze are believed to make up anywhere three percent (Petran 1972: 28) to six percent (Carpenter 2013: 1). An aggregate estimation of these sources is used to find Syria’s ethnoreligious distribution (see Figure 4, below).

### Syria's Ethnoreligious Groups

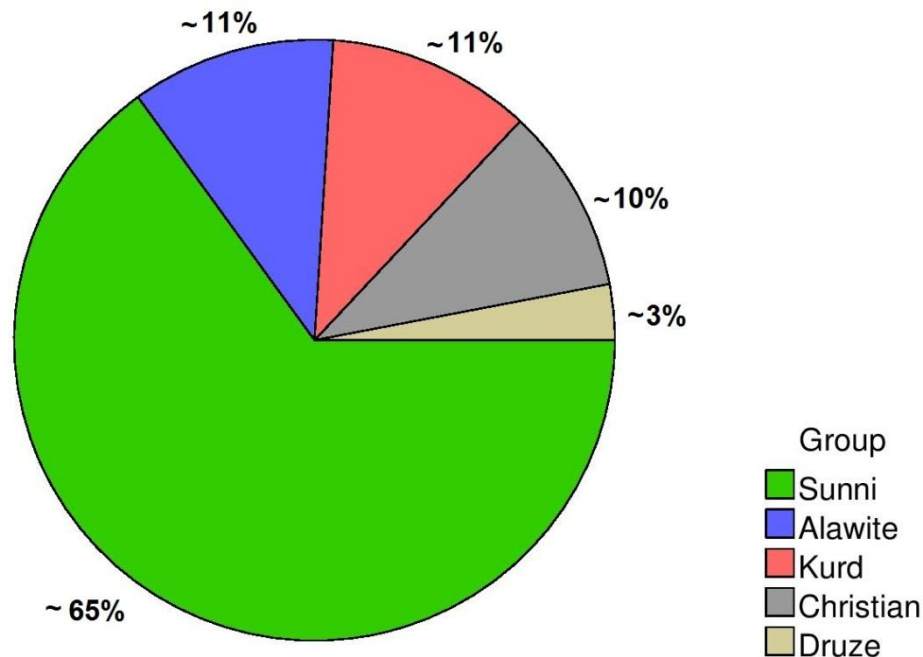


Figure 4. This pie chart depicts Syria's estimated ethnoreligious distribution.

In addition to these cultural divisions, Syria's ethnoreligious communities tend to be geographically separated and distributed so that there are homogenous sub-national units within the country. Though the Sunnis are the majority throughout most of Syria, minority presence can be felt chiefly in certain geographic areas—Kurds in the north, Alawites and Christians in the northwest, and Druzes in the south.

With respect to such diversity, Nikolaos van Dam shows how ethnic minorities can also exist as religious minorities: "Whereas the Kurds, Turcoman and Circassians are almost exclusively Sunni Muslims, and in that respect belong to a majority of the population, the Armenians are Christians and thus represent both an ethnic and religious minority" (Van Dam 1979: 15). The ethnoreligious diversity in Syria is checked by dual Arab Muslim identification

among minority groups. Alawites and Druzes, for example, often see themselves as Muslim despite poignant non-Muslim practices. Similarly, Christians often identify chiefly as Arab Christians.

Van Dam (1979) distinguishes between Syrian religion and ethnicity. As most Syrians often belong to both ethnic and religious groups, these distinctions can be helpful. For instance, a Syrian may identify ethnically as Kurdish and religiously as Sunni Muslim; another may identify ethnically as Arab and religiously as Alawite. Though these distinctions are sometimes useful, the importance of religion in defining ethnic group membership cannot be overlooked. Robert Owen, cited by Clark (2002: 39), argues that Middle Eastern religious groups should be viewed as communities wherein religion is a kind of “ethnic marker defining the boundary of one community as against another.” In this way, group membership is characterized by an ethnic sense of belonging based chiefly upon religion. Two groups this distinction particularly applies to are the Alawites and Druzes. While both are religious groups, they are at the same time ethnicities due to a mobilization around their unique religious practices, which serve as markers of group identity, as well as their close kinship ties and group particularity (Nisan 1991: 79–112). Of course, there is variation in how groups tend to mobilize around and attach meaning to salient differences. Syrian Kurds, for instance, define group membership predominantly in ethnic terms, since Kurds widely practice the dominant religion in Syria, Sunni Islam. For both simplicity and consistency, the term “ethnoreligious” will be employed generally to include all ethnic and religious groups, despite this variation.

### **Syria’s Kurds**

Although the Kurds live in much larger numbers in Syria’s neighboring countries of Turkey and Iraq, they make up a considerable minority in the country. Ethnic, cultural,

geographic, and historical distinctiveness define Kurdish particularity from the Arab majority. According to Nisan (1991: 27–28), a unique language and tribal structure are important factors in defining the tightly knit Kurdish communities. Both the Arab conquest of Syria in the seventh century and waves of Arabization of Kurdish areas of Syria in the 1950s challenged Kurdish particularity (Nisan 1991: 28–35).

Kurds largely converted to Sunni Islam after the Arab conquest, but did not wholly adopt Arab Muslim practices. Kurds are predominantly Sunni, but their religion is often colored by the Sufi tradition—considered heretical by most orthodox Muslims (Starr 2012: 34, Nisan 1991: 35, Borneman 2007: 35). Because of this, Kurds are typically defamed by Arab Islam. Nisan (1991: 28–29) quotes an Arab saying that identifies Kurds as one of “the three plagues in the world.”

Starr (2012: 39) describes Kurds as “Syria’s third class citizens.” Kurds have historically been denied citizenship, prohibited from building private schools, and forbidden to teach the Kurdish language. Both before and after Syrian independence from the French, Syrian Kurds have experienced poverty, displacement and resettlement, mass imprisonment, forced migration, execution, destruction of villages, inadequate refugee aid, and inadequate medicine. Nisan (1991: 35) wrote that Kurdish history is defined by “cultural repression, economic impoverishment, and political powerlessness.”

### **Syria’s Christians**

A sizable minority in Syria, Christians have lived in the territories of modern Syria long before Muslim armies from the Arabian Peninsula reached Damascus in the mid- seventh century. The largest Christian denomination is Greek Orthodox, but Syriac Catholic (Assyrian), Maronite, and Protestant communities are also present. Syrian Christians manage civil issues



such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance through their own laws and are religiously endogamous, not accepting marriages with Muslims (Starr 2012: 31–32).

### **Syria's Alawites**

The Alawites are one of Syria's most important ethnoreligious groups. In the context of the Syrian Civil War, the Alawite character of the Syrian regime and military apparatus cannot be ignored. Syria's Alawite population lives mostly in the mountains of northwest Syria in the provinces of Latakia and Tartus, Syria's only provinces with access to the Mediterranean Sea. Alawites have inhabited this region, also known as Jabal al-Nusayriya (the Nusayriya Mountain), since the thirteenth century (Talhamy 2009: 561–562). After Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, Alawite hegemony resulted in the group's elevated status. Many Alawites moved to the traditionally Sunni cities such as Homs, Hama, and Damascus, establishing wealthy Alawite districts. Alawite populations also spill over Syria's borders, with major group clusters in Hatay Province, Turkey and northern Lebanon around the city of Tripoli (Talhamy 2009: 562).

While the Alawite Syrian regime has strived to portray Alawites as Arabs and Muslims, Alawites are described by Nisan (1991: 100) as “neither Arabs nor Muslims.” While centuries of oppression helped to solidify Alawite particularity, the group's differences are situated around other cultural dimensions. Central to Alawite cultural identity is their unique religion (Nisan 99: 1991).

While there is much debate with regards to Alawite origins, Middle Eastern scholars such as Nisan (1991) generally agree that the Alawite religion has its origins in seventh century Iraq. Around 891, Muhammad Ibn Nusair proclaimed himself the *bab* (door) of the Imams and assumed the status of a religious prophet. Ibn Nusair's deviation from the Islamic mainstream was stark and he was even reported to have seen Christ. Though Ibn Nusair's unorthodoxy set in

place his heretical status for both Sunnis and Shias, Nusair drew upon the Shia Imamic tendency in highlighting his religious initiative. Facing persecution, Ibn Nusair and his followers fled Iraq and found refuge in the rugged mountains of northwest Syria (Nisan 1991: 99). For most of Alawite history, the group was known alternatively as the Nusairi sect or the Nusairis until 1920 (Talhamy 2009: 561).

Central to Alawite or Nusairi religious faith is the veneration of Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and leader of Shi'ism. For Alawites and Shias alike, Ali is the incarnation of the divine (Talhamy 2009: 561). This primacy of Ali places the Alawite religion as an offshoot of Shia Islam. Other features of the Alawite religion, however, raise questions about the group's relation to Shia Islam. Alawism is based upon a doctrine reflecting several theological and philosophical influences. The religious doctrine of Alawism is described by Ajami as a "syncretistic theology that included Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Christian, Muslim, and Zoroastrian elements" (2012: 15). Salamandra describes the Alawite religious sect as "a syncretic blend of Muslim, Christian, and Judaic beliefs and practices" (2004: 8). Nisan also identifies an array of influences, suggesting syncretism between multiple religious faiths:

Phoenician paganism and Christian trinitarianism allegedly coexist with Islamic notions. Astral images and nature cults predominate in 'Alawite spiritual visions and experiences. Greek or Gnostic conceptions of the divinity intersperse with human inception as a key element in theology. (Nisan 1991: 99-100)

Although these religious deviances are striking, especially within an Islamic context, Salamandra still highlights the primacy of Alawite Islamic affiliation, characterizing the Alawite sect as "an offshoot of Shi'I Islam" (Salamanda 2004: 8). Still, others such as Talhamy argue that there are very few similarities between Shi'ism and Alawism (2009: 562).

Though Alawites are officially classified as Muslims in the modern Syrian context, their practices tend to deviate from Muslim orthodoxy in several areas. According to Starr (2012: 40),

many Alawites drink, frequent nightclubs, do not attend mosque, spend time with foreigners, and do not fast during the holy month of Ramadan. Borneman (2007: xxvi) argues that most Alawites tend to be “consistently undogmatic” and claims to have met Alawites who do not follow the pillars and restrictions of Islam (2007: xxvi). According to Nisan (1991: 100), external sources tend to highlight and castigate such deviance from Islam—Alawites are frequently believed to be “excessively permissive of moral and religious deviation” and Alawites are often charged with “debauchery in sex, the eating of pork, the drinking of wine during séances, and worshipping the devil” (Nisan 1991: 100).

These charges date back to the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century puritanical interpretations of Sunni Islam under the scholar Ibn Taymiyya, who issued several *fatwas* (legal religious rulings) against Alawites. Ibn Taymiyya claimed that Alawites were greater infidels than Christians, Jews, and idolaters, and authorized *jihad* (holy war) against them (Ajami 2012: 7, Lesch 2012: 2). Though Alawites obtained their own *fatwas* that intended to integrate them with Syria’s Muslim population and end their heretic status, many Sunni Muslims still believe Alawites to be heretics (Talhamy 2009: 562, Salamandra 2004: 8).

Because of their infidel and heretic status in the eyes of many Muslims, the Alawites have historically suffered socially, politically, and economically. Under the Ottomans, the Alawites endured famine and poverty, subjugated by their Sunni landlords (Talhamy 2009: 563). Under these conditions, Alawites often worked as sharecroppers for wealthy urban Sunni families and were often compelled to sell their own daughters into servitude (Salamandra 2004: 8). Nisan writes that “this disgrace remained a vivid experience into the twentieth century” (1991: 100).

## Syria's Druzes

Nisan (1991) categorizes Alawites as a heterodox Muslim sect, along with another important ethnoreligious group—the Druze. Syria's Druze population mainly lives in the southern state of Jabal al-Druze. Much like the Alawites, the Druzes are characterized by their ambiguous relationship with Islamic and Arab labels.

The origins of Druze religious doctrine is shrouded in secrecy and mystery (Starr 2012: 48.). Druze are generally accepted to be distinct from the Arab Islamic qualities of the Middle East, but their origins are highly debated—the Druze are variously claimed to have historic origins derived from Greek, Indian, Egyptians, French, Persian, Iraqi, Berber, or Arabian descent (Nisan 1991: 79-80). The commonly accepted origin of Druze religious faith dates back to the early eleventh century with the Egyptian Fatimid caliph al-Hakim bi-amr Allah. Al-Hakim is said to have stopped leading public prayer, opposed fasting during Ramadan, and prohibited *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Nisan (1991: 81) writes that al-Hakim subsequently became “the God of the Druze religion.”

The Druze replaced the pillars of Islam with a moral code of behavior emphasizing aspects of communal unity, mutual self-help, and collective self-defense. Even the status of Muhammad was rejected, dismissed by the Druze as “erroneous ministers of God” (Nisan 1991: 82). It was these rejections of Islamic beliefs that led Peter Gubser, cited by Nisan (1991:81), to write that “the Druzes are not Muslim.” As with the Alawites, Ibn Taymiyya rejected the Druze from the Muslim community by issuing a *fatwa* against them. Druze religious beliefs are not centered not upon Muslim theological thought, but gnostic belief. The idea of metempsychosis—the transmigration of the soul after death—places the Druze as “outright non-Islamic to the core” (Nisan 1991: 81–82). However, much like the Alawites, the Druze were integrated into the world

of Islam with a *fatwa* stating the Druzes are in fact Muslim, despite these theological differences (Nisan 1991: 91).

### **Ethnoreligious Groups: Identity, Diversity and Accommodation**

In the past, these ethnoreligious groups have managed at times to live together peacefully. The cleavages between disparate groups have devolved into intergroup conflict at other times. Hermann (1988: 71) shows that at time loyalties have tended to “develop to [ethnic] communities or regions, not to the nation as a whole.”

This complex configuration of ethnoreligious groups helps to distinguish Syria as a diverse Middle Eastern state. Within this framework of modern and historical ethnoreligious diversity, how has order been maintained? Scholars such as D. G. Hogarth, noted by Nisan (1991: 18), have marveled at the poignant ability for Arabs to absorb peoples with no related ancestry into the expansive Arab nation. For minorities, individual identification as “Arab” comes partly as a choice in the context of modern Arab nationalist movements, such as that in twentieth century Syria. Decades of pan-Arab rhetoric from the secular Ba’th Party under the Assad regime has influenced many Syrians to identify as Arabs, although their ancestors may not have done the same.

Ethnic and religious minorities have been a constant feature of the Middle East and have played an important role in shaping the region since the beginning of the modern era (Clark 2002: 36). Conflict between ethnic groups account for a historical reality, but according to Middle Eastern historian Albert Hourani (1961: 71), they have not always been as intense as they are now. Hourani contended that the concept of race is not given the same degree of importance in the Middle East as it is in the West because of the historical reality of intermarriage between peoples such as the Turks, Persians, Arabs, and Mongols. Van Dam (1979: 16) argues that before

Middle Eastern nationalism, “the major national groups such as Arabs, Turks, Persians and Kurds were fairly tolerant in their attitudes toward one another.”

The main reason for the historically diminished role of ethnic or racial distinctions, Hourani argued, is Islam. The importance given to Islam meant that religious—rather than racial or ethnic affiliation—served as the primary characteristic used to define the various peoples in the region (Hourani 1991: 71–73). Similarly, Clark (2002: 36) argues that during the Ottoman period, racial, national, linguistic, ethnic, and tribal affiliations all played secondary roles to religious membership (Clark). Van Dam (1979: 16) notes that during this time, intolerance was directed toward group perceived as heretical such as the Alawites, Druzes, and Isma’ilis.

The Ottoman Empire (1299–1923) represented a political order based upon religion rather than race or ethnicity. It therefore conformed to the Islamic model—where Muslims were the majority, Islam was the state religion, and the sultan was the leader of the *ummah* (Islamic community). Within this context, the *millets*, or non-Muslim minority communities were allowed to govern themselves under their own religious laws (Clark 2002: 36). This religiously-based autonomy affirmed the heterogeneous character of the region (Kedourie 1988: 27).

During the Ottoman period, the *millet* (confessional community) system had some success. However, differences between peoples increased over time and what had previously been religious communities transformed into nationalist ones. “Inherited religious affiliation surpassed religious belief in importance, and the word *millet* gradually assumed the meaning of nation” (Clark 2002: 36). Of course, national sentiments existed among the many communities within the Ottoman Empire, but these were secondary to religion.

The influx of Western ideas, both directly and indirectly, led to the changes that see ethnicity and nationalism take greater meaning in the modern Middle East. “Western influence

led to thinking along Western lines, especially in terms of nationalism” (Clark 2002: 36). The product of this development was the slow crumbling of the empire, which had held together the region for nearly five hundred years. Following several revolts against Ottoman rule in the nineteenth century, a Turkish nationalist front gained power and sought to forcefully Turkize all citizens of the Ottoman Empire. This led to a series of nationalist reactions by the Albanians, Kurds, and Arabs. Their nationalist rebellions caused the Turks to abandon the concept of a multi-ethnic empire (Clark 2002: 36–37).

During World War I, the Ottoman Empire sided with the Central Powers. Allied states such as France and Britain attempted to stir up Arab nationalist fervor in order to bring down the Ottoman Empire from within. In exchange for their help, France and Britain promised Arab independence. However, the British and French had secretly agreed on a plan to divide the Ottoman provinces among themselves in what was known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 (Petran 1972: 54). When the war ended, the British were given control over Iraq and Palestine while the French expressed power in Syria, Lebanon, and the Hatay Province of Turkey. French post-World War I power in the Middle East became known as the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon (see Figure 5, below).

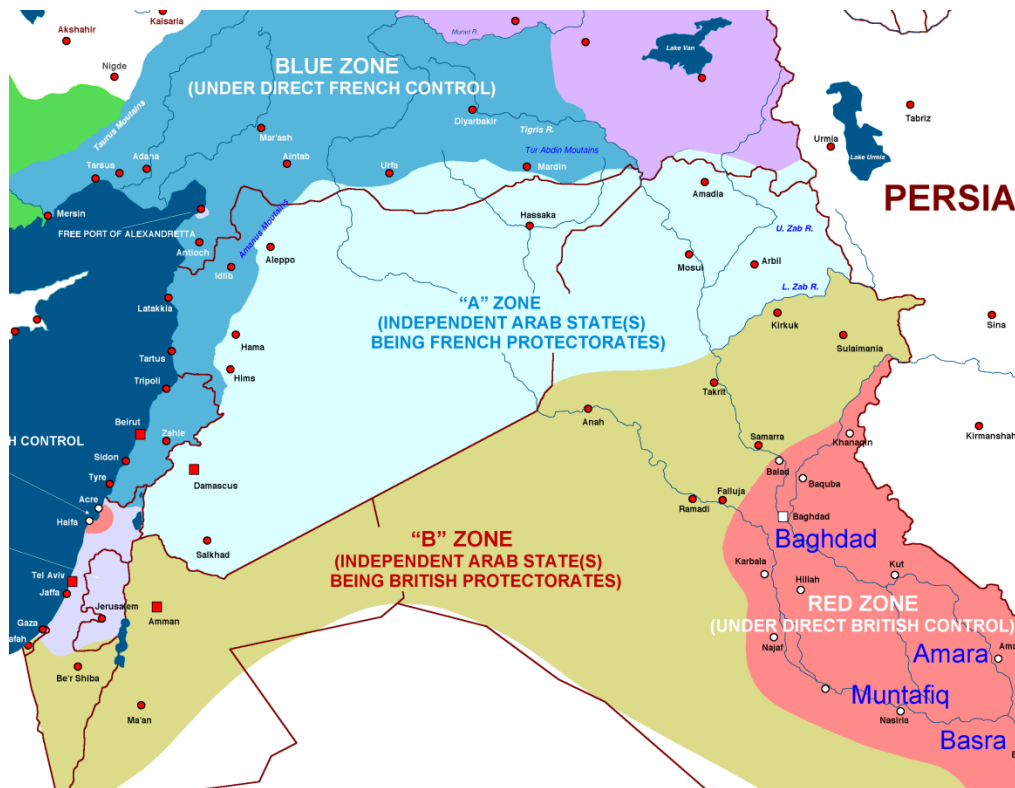


Figure 5. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 partitioned the Levant between the British and the French (Izady 2006–2010).

Between 1921 and 1945, the French pursued a minority-oriented “divide and rule” policy in Syria. During this period, Arab nationalism was stymied with the encouragement of separatism and particularism of ethnoreligious minorities. As part of this policy, regions where ethnoreligious minorities formed the local majority were granted autonomy. In Syria, the Sunnis formed a majority in all but two areas—Jabal al-Druze and Latakia. The Druze and Alawites were thus granted formal independence from the Syrian Republic by French colonial administrators (Van Dam 1979: 18).

During the French Mandate, ethnoreligious minorities also benefitted from French policy that favored minority groups in military positions. The manifestation of Alawite, Druze, Kurds, and Christian minority particularity found vivid expression in widespread recruitment into the



armed forces (Clark 2002: 38). The Alawites in particular benefitted from this policy. During the Mandate period, three of eight infantry battalions in *Troupes spéciales* (special troops) were Alawite units. In Latakia and Antioch, 90 percent of the soldiers were Alawites (Nisan 1991: 103). Later the Alawites would use their position in the military to achieve political power.

In the years before the French left Syria, members of Syria's various ethnoreligious minorities begged the French to stay. A petition signed by 450,000 Alawites, Christians, and other minorities in 1936 requested that the French to stay in order to protect the minorities from the danger they faced with Sunni domination (Starr 2012: 203).

The French did not agree to stay and Syria declared its independence in 1943. Syria was rocked by a series of military coup d'états in the initial post-independence years, and the Sunni majority was unable to establish a stable government that could integrate all of Syria's people into a national framework (Nisan 1991: 104). The founding of Israel in 1948 presented Syria with a catalyst to pursue pan-Arab unity, and in 1958 Syria and Egypt united as the United Arab Republic (UAR) (Borneman 2007: xix).

### **Creating a Modern Syria: Nationalism, Alawites, and the Ba'ath Party**

The founding of modern Syria struck a blow to minority autonomy that had been encouraged during the French Mandate. With independence, ethnoreligious minorities feared that Syria would revert to urban Sunni domination. Such minorities—Alawites, Druzes, Kurds, Circassians, and Isma'ilis—predominated in the military due to French policy. In the 1950s, the minorities began to plan to exert their power via the military. In addition, investments in the politically radical Ba'ath nationalist party would prove to be fruitful (Nisan 1991: 104).

The post-independence political ideology of the Ba’th Party was a nationalist, socialist, pan-Arab response to European colonialism and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The original doctrine of the Ba’th Party sought to combine secular pan-Arab nationalism with a non-Marxist socialism.

Salamandra (2007: 9) notes that the Syrian constitution states that “the Arab nation constitutes a cultural unit. Any differences existing among its sons are accidental and unimportant. They will disappear with the awakening of the Arab consciousness.” Many ethnoreligious minorities—particularly Christians, Alawites, and Druzes—became attracted to these elements of the Ba’th project (Rabinovich 1988: 160). Syrian secession from the UAR in 1962 was organized within the Ba’th Military Committee resident in Egypt (Nisan 1991: 104). In early 1963, the Ba’th Party seized power under the slogan, “Unity, Liberty, Socialism” (Borneman 2007: xix).

According to Borneman, Ba’athism is “largely egalitarian and pragmatic, encouraging religious pluralism” (2007: xi). The Ba’th Party sought to create a sense of nationhood, binding the multiplicity of Syrian ethnoreligious groups. For the Ba’th Party, ethnoreligious sectarianism was seen as a “dangerous social diseases” (Van Dam 1979: 26). Yet despite these ideological goals, the Ba’th Party was constructed through traditional ethnoreligious social channels. Minorities made up a large majority of the Ba’th military and political officials.

The Alawites were particularly in a strategic position, holding powerful military and party posts. Between 1963 and 1966, the Alawite and Druze officers worked together to purge Sunnis from the Ba’th political and military leadership. In 1966, the Ba’th Military Committee led a coup against the Ba’th political wing. Between 1966 and 1970, underneath the avowedly secular political surface of the Ba’th regime, a minority scenario was being pursued. Sunni and

Druze officers were wholly purged from the regime, and one Alawite officer, Hafez al-Assad, secured the regime for all Syrian Alawites (Nisan 1991: 105).

In 1971, Hafez al-Assad replaced the collective leadership of the Ba'th Party with his own personal rule. In 1973, a new constitution granted the president ultimate power in all fields (Borneman 2007: xxi). Because the Assad ruling dynasty comes from a minority religious sect, references to religion, sectarianism, and regional loyalties have been avoided by the Syrian regime. The Assad regime has also explicitly enforced Syrian unity through resistance against Israel (Starr 2012: 53).

Although he actively avoided calling attention to his minority status, Hafez al-Assad was at the same time anxious to preserve Alawite hegemony. Assad attempted to appoint an Alawite to command every Syrian military combat unit (Owen 2012: 45). Even in cases where unit commanders were not Alawite, the senior Alawite within the unit is directly tied to the higher ethno-sectarian command structure, linked closely with the regime. Hermann argues that Hafez al-Assad created a parallel Alawite command structure “more effective than the formal military command structure” (1988: 76).

Alawite dominance continued to characterize the Syrian regime throughout the rule of Hafez al-Assad, as well as under that of Bashar al-Assad. In 2007, Borneman characterized the Alawite sect as operating as a clan “amassing wealth and centralizing power through a clientistic system that rewards disproportionately other members of the Alawite sect” (2007: xviii). Clearly, the pan-Arab framework had given way to ethnoreligious hegemony. Rabinovich (1988: 160–161) argues that the Ba'thist Syrian regime has been a victim of its own success. While it was initially representative of many of Syria's ethnoreligious communities, the Alawite regime is now solely preoccupied with remaining in power. Concurrently, Syrian politics since Assad's

takeover has been increasingly characterized by a struggle between Alawites and those seeking to oust Assad.

The Syrian regime that has existed since Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970 is characteristic of an Arab political system that has existed in the post-colonial Middle East and North Africa. In such states, a centralized structure of power is built around a presidency and supported by the army and security services. Middle Eastern countries including Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Algeria, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, and Iraq have historically relied upon similar structures of oppression, where the security state's main function has been to maintain a president in power for life. Roger Owen (2012) outlines the stratification of power in such systems. At the apex of the Arab regime is the presidential office, along with a small group of advisers from the military, security forces, and the business elite. Below the presidential authority are the senior members of the army, the intelligence agencies, police, and a small group of crony capitalists. Under them are the main agencies of civilian administration, the ministries, provincial governors, state media, and the "tame religious establishment" (Owen 2012: 38).

The majority of Arab regimes in the Middle East have used components of the republican model to justify their authority. In particular, constitutions have been crucial to the establishment of republics in the Middle East. In the context of Arab dictatorships, constitutions have served to consolidate ultimate power in the hands of the few. In Arab dictatorships, constitutions and elections serve the explicit purpose of ensuring and legitimizing that the president or king has ultimate power.

The structure of the Arab regime relies upon the violent repression of all forms of dissent in order to maintain the status quo. Owen (2012: 27–38) writes that the Arab security state is "fierce" and "ruthless," relying upon violent tactics including torture, disappearances,

extrajudicial killings, and the employment of paramilitary death squads. The Syrian regime is no different. Between 1976 and 1982, the Syrian regime led by Hafez al-Assad battled an Islamist rebellion led by the Muslim Brotherhood, which eventually resulted with insurrection in several cities. In February 1982, the Assad regime cracked down on the city of Hama. The Syrian armed forces, commanded by Rifaat al-Assad—Hafez’s younger brother—entered Hama and massacred Sunni civilians. Between ten and thirty thousand civilians were killed (Borneman 2007: xxi, Nisan 1991: 110).

### **Syria’s ‘Culture of Fear’: Igniting Civil War**

Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar have used these tactics to produce a society characterized by a degree of collective fear. Sluka (200: 22–23) cites Taussing, Suarez-Orozco, and Green, who formed the terms “culture of terror” and “culture of fear” to describe societies where the status quo can only be maintained by the permanent and systematic use of violence and intimidation by the state, a culture of terror flourishes. Cultures of terror establish “collective fear” within the population, but also leave an impression on the society that can be measured even after the repression ends (Sluka 2000: 22–23). This collective fear and culture of terror are characteristic of Syria, where according to Salamandra (2004: 13) “fear...is perhaps the dominant characteristic of urban Syrian society.”

The Syrian regime uses the *mukhabarat* (security and intelligence services) to control the population. Lesch (2012) writes that there are about 60 thousand full-time security officers in the various security branches as well as thousands of part-time personnel. Lesch writes:

Pre-emptive fear and intimidation are useful tools that are frequently employed by security agents to deter potential unrest and disruptive activities by real or perceived opposition elements inside and outside the country. As a result, there is a certain level of countrywide paranoia, which the regime uses to maintain control over the population. (Lesch 2012: 65–66)

When demonstrations against the Assad regime began in early 2011, the *mukhabarat* were quickly mobilized against protesters.

The uprising against the authoritarian regime in Syria was inspired by the successful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt (and eventually Libya and Yemen) beginning in 2010. After the self-immolation of Mohammd Bouzizi, the psyche of Arabs had changed. By late January 2011, when the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes had already fell, Bashar al-Assad told journalists from the *Wall Street Journal* that his rule was “immune” to the troubles of the Arab Spring (Starr 2012: 5). Surely, the Syrian Arab Republic was considered one of most stable Middle Eastern states for decades. The only Arab regime to successfully transfer power from father to son, the Assad regime has remained in power for over forty-three years. Though the protests had not yet begun in Syria, Syrians of all ages had heard about the revolutions across the Arab world. Among those who had heard were ten schoolchildren between the ages of nine and fifteen. Inspired by a slogan from the Egyptian Revolution, they decided to write “Down with the Regime” on the wall of their school. The children were subsequently arrested, interrogated, and reportedly tortured by Syrian security services (Lesch 2012: 55–56).

On March 15, a few hundred protesters, many the relatives of the imprisoned children, marched in front of the Omari mosque in downtown Deraa, calling for the release of the children and for reform of the corrupt and repressive system. The protests grew to several thousand and Syrian security forces opened fire on the crowd, killing four people. The next day, about 20 thousand people turned out in protest. They attended the funerals of those slain the previous day, chanted anti-government slogans, and inflicted damage on the Ba’th Party headquarters, the governor’s office, and the headquarters of the security forces (Lesch 2012: 56).

Daily protests continued and conflict escalated on March 23, when Syrian forces carried out a more vigorous crackdown. Security forces raided the Omari mosque, which had been turned into a makeshift field hospital, treating wounded protesters and offering refuge for those in fear of their lives. At least fifteen civilians were reportedly killed, and hundreds wounded. Electricity, water, and mobile phone networks were cut off and government forces set up checkpoints to quarantine Deraa. The government siege of Deraa had begun. (Lesch 2012: 56–57).

One of the most galvanizing events early in the uprising was the tragic arrest, torture, death, and mutilation of a 13-year-old schoolboy in Deraa allegedly by regime forces. Hamza Ali al-Khateeb disappeared when pro-government gunmen broke up a protest in late April 2011. His mutilated corpse was returned to his family nearly a month later, beaten beyond recognition, burned, stabbed, and castrated. Images and videos of Hamza were spread across the Internet as activists reacted in horror to such brutality. For protesters, this event proved to them that the Assad regime had lost all credibility (Ziter 2013: 122). Protests spread across Syria and the government deployed the military to quell the unrest, using snipers, tanks, and artillery against besieged cities.

Weary from the fierce and indiscriminate regime response, protesters who had taken up arms to defend themselves joined defected soldiers. On July 29, 2011 the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed as the main armed opposition group. At this juncture, the conflict in Syria morphed from an uprising into an armed insurgency. While the rebels initially made strategic gains, these were reversed as the opposition became increasingly fragmented and prone to infighting—there are now said to be as many as one thousand armed opposition groups in Syria

(Sinjab 2013). An armed opposition gave the Assad regime cause to increase force, using civilian massacres, summary-style executions, and internationally-banned chemical weapons.

Since the beginning of Syria's descent into chaos, groups with terrorist links and extremist ideologies traveled to the embattled nation to fight. Jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have links to al-Qaeda. These extremist groups have been some of the most effective and disciplined fighting for the Syrian opposition, helping win strategically vital battles across Syria. These groups—ISIL in particular—employ brutal tactics and commit widespread human rights abuses, including mass execution characterized by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria as “war crimes” and “crimes against humanity” (“ISIL Jihadists Conduct ‘Mass Executions’ in Syria: UN Probe” 2014). The acts perpetrated by ISIL were so horrific that even al-Qaeda distanced itself from the group (“Al Qaeda Distances Itself from Syrian Jihadists” 2014). By April 2013, ISIL had already taken over large swaths of land in the north, including the provincial capital of al-Raqqa and four border towns (*Analysis: Syria's Insurgent Landscape* 1-9: 2013). The rise of ISIL has resulted in a significant increase in clashes between opposition groups (Syria Needs Analysis Project 2014: 1–4).

On the other side, the Assad regime has also received direct military support from Shia militant extremists from Lebanon, Iran, and Iraq. Particularly, the Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah constitutes a determined pro-regime fighting force. Hezbollah has helped Assad win numerous strategically significant battles, most notably the Battle of al-Qusayr in mid-2013 (O'Bagy 2013: 1–6). The regime has also relied upon another sectarian force, *shabiha* (ghost), to enact violence against the opposition. Before the uprising, *shabiha* referred to group of criminals who earned money by smuggling goods from Lebanon and racketeering. Principally composed



of members of the Alawite sect, *shabiha* were incorporated into the Syrian National Defense Forces at the beginning of the uprising. They have been linked with some of most egregious human rights violations such as the Houla massacre in which 108 people, including 49 children, were butchered (Alexander 2012).

### **Ending Conflict: An Elusive Goal**

After three years of intensifying conflict, Syria is situated to experience generations of violence and counter-violence. During such time, any international response taken to halt or prevent violence must be informed by the ethnoreligious loyalties and antagonisms now dominating Syria. United Nations (UN) peacebuilding efforts tend to have poor success rates—in recent decades, about 50 percent of UN-mediated conflict areas have returned to violence within five years of signing the peace agreement (Filipov 2006: 7). Accordingly, the UN reported that the causes of conflict “offer significant obstacles that might impede the establishment of peace” (Filipov 2006: 21) and that “the elimination of the causes of the conflict usually necessitates a wider approach of capacity building that will lay the grounds for the future lasting peace” (Filipov 2006: 7). In a post-war Syria, peace is only feasible when ethnoreligious tensions are addressed through conflict-reduction and capacity-building measures, which so far seem unlikely.

Allegations of systematic torture, extrajudicial killings, and the deployment of internationally banned chemical weapons against civilians have also been reported via the Internet (Lynch et al. 2014). At the same time, the situation is at times so difficult for international authorities to verify that the UN has actually stopped counting the number of deaths (Heilprin 2014). As of April 2014, the death toll reported by the Syrian Human Rights Watch exceeds 150,000 (Evans 2014). Those taking the heaviest toll are unarmed civilians, specifically

children. According to Save the Children, over ten thousand of those killed were children (Save the Children 2014). A UN report covering the period from 1 March 2011 to 15 November 2013, lists a range of abuses that Syria's children have suffered "including sexual violence" (United Nations 2014).

Meanwhile, a deluge of refugees—over 2.5 million as of February 2014—have fled to neighboring countries and at least 6.5 million Syrians are classified as internally displaced peoples or IDPs. Syrians are now the largest group of displaced people in the world, totaling at least 40 percent of Syria's pre-conflict population (UNHCR 2014). Of the seemingly endless numbers of refugees from the Syrian Civil War, most have been fleeing to neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. The refugee situation threatens to destabilize the entire region; spillover from the conflict has already been felt in Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey (Barnes-Dacey 2012: 1-6).

## **Part Two: Interviews**

Four interviews were administered to Syrian-Americans as part of this research project, and reveal a range of opinions of Syrian expatriates toward the conflict that has torn apart their homeland. Interviews averaging between thirty minutes to one hour were conducted in person, by phone, or via email, using a semi-structured interview questionnaire (see Appendix A). Interview subjects signed confidentiality agreements to protect their anonymity (see Appendix B). Subjects were found via informal networks. Pseudonyms are used herein when referring to interview subjects.

Amir is a Sunni from Damascus who fled Syria in 1980 at the age of twenty-three, moving to the United States and marrying an American woman. Amir has not traveled back home since he left Syria illegally in 1980, but he stays connected to his immediate family who

remains in the capital. Ali is a Sunni whose family is from Homs. While he left Syria to live in Saudi Arabia by the age of one, he traveled back home every other summer, studied in Syria for four years, and remained connected through his familial network. The last time Ali traveled to Syria was in 2010, and Ali has taken a leading role in pro-revolution group Syrian Expatriates Organization (SEO) based in Washington D.C. Hassan, a Sunni from Damascus, left Syria in 1996 to attend medical school. He lives in the Greater Boston area and is an active voice in the Syrian expatriate community. On a recent humanitarian trip, Hassan traveled to refugee camps in Turkey and crossed the border into northern Syria in late 2012. Finally, Sabirah is a Sunni originally from Damascus and is now an undergraduate student at a Boston-area university. While she spent most of her childhood in Saudi Arabia, Sabirah still has family in Damascus.

Three interview subjects, Amir, Ali, and Hassan, expressed that Syria was characterized by a degree of tolerance and coexistence between ethnoreligious groups when they lived in Syria. Hassan stated that, “Syrians actually have a lot of respect for each other—that is how Syrians survived for centuries” (Hassan, author’s interview, January 17 2014). Similarly, Ali maintained that there is a misconception about the level of ethno-sectarian tensions in Syria. “When I went to secondary school in Syria,” Ali told me, “I had a group of good friends. In our group of friends, two other boys shared my name, Ali. One ‘Ali’ was a Sunni, another an Alawite, and the last was a Christian. Though we were all from different sects, we were still all friends—we did not care to see any differences between us” (Ali, author’s interview, December 02 2013).

All of the interview subjects have strong opinions about the ongoing conflict in Syria and Bashar al-Assad. They each expressed their opposition to the Assad regime and initial support for the revolution. However, Amir stated, “When the conflict first began I was 100 percent

behind the opposition. Now I am not so sure” (Amir, author’s interview, November 18 2013).

Amir’s ambivalence is mainly due to the radical elements of the opposition. He blamed sectarian killing of Christians and Alawites on the Islamist opposition, exclaiming, “We do not want Alawites to be slaughtered!” (Amir, author’s interview, November 18 2013). Sabirah expressed that, “During the initial protests, Assad began controlling the minorities so they would all back him. He used fear mongering to scare them” (Sabirah, author’s interview, January 19 2013).

Amir concurred with Sabirah’s sentiments, blaming the Assad regime for playing on ethnoreligious minority fears: “The rhetoric of the regime that terrorists are the ones behind the opposition in Syria, al-Qaeda, divides the people. Many are afraid of this possibility” (Amir, author’s interview, November 18 2013).

### **Part Three: Findings**

The construction of group loyalties in Syria around ethnicity has led to divisions between its many ethnoreligious groups. In recent times prior to armed conflict during the Arab Spring, these divisions were present, yet remained benign. As noted previously, interview subjects viewed the opposition as moderate and secular. They blamed the Assad regime for supporting radical elements of the opposition in order to discredit the movement. When the protests began on March 15, 2011, tensions began to simmer, and distrust and paranoia between Syrian ethnoreligious groups festered. Today the fragile mosaic of peoples in Syria has erupted into intergroup conflict based upon the construction of ethnoreligious differences. By nurturing group antagonisms and fostering a heightened sense of insider versus outsider attitudes, group boundaries have been formed (see Barth 1969, Allport 1979). At the same time, group boundaries have at times been blurred as minority ethnoreligious groups band together, fearing potential Sunni Arab domination.

At its very root, the Syrian Civil War is not an ethnoreligious war. In fact, in its earliest phases, the Syrian uprising was truly secular. People of all ages, occupations, religions, and ethnicities took to the streets calling for democratic reforms and the downfall of the Assad regime. The northwestern city of Latakia, an Alawite stronghold, was one of the first areas in Syria to join anti-government protests in March and April 2011 (Starr 2012: 40). Between April and July, opposition demonstrators chanted secular anti-regime messages—“No Sunnis, no Alawites, no Druze, no Isma’ilis, we are all Syria”; “One, one, one, Sunni and Alawite are one!”; “We’re Muslims, we’re Alawites, we’re Christians”; and “No to sectarianism!” (Yazbik 2012: 18, 169, 210, 244). The opposition employed such slogans in order to reassure Syrian minorities that the protest movement was not driven by sectarianism. Yazbik (2012: 32, 116, 38) also reports that the Syrian opposition was broadly representative of all Syrian ethnoreligious minorities, including Christians, Kurds, and Alawites.

Although there was this early diversity, the vast majority of protesters in 2012 were still ethnoreligiously Sunni Arab. Lesch (2012: 100) writes that as protests developed, “they tended to concentrate in areas where there were clear Sunni majorities.” As the Alawite-dominated government initiated its brutal crackdown against these unarmed protesters, it fueled tensions between the Sunni Arab majority and Alawite minority. Alternatively, Owen (2012: 177) has argued that the Syrian uprising was from its very beginning characterized by ethnoreligious conflict stating that “old divisions were immediately revived...between the Alawi rulers of Syria and many of their Sunni compatriots.”

Either way, as the violence increased inside Syria, the historical societal divisions became more apparent and the battle lines more closely resembled ethnoreligious boundaries. By late 2011, Sunnis dominated the main political and military opposition factions, the FSA and the

Syrian National Coalition (SNC) (Carpenter 2013: 2). Meanwhile, Syria's communities of ethnoreligious minorities, especially the Alawites and Christians, have remained supportive or at least tolerant of the Assad regime. These developments are very much the outcomes of strategic ethnoreligious boundary construction by the Syrian regime. The Assad regime has used ethnoreligious group boundaries in order to define "us-versus-them," or friend from foe. In order to understand the construction of ethnic boundaries, it is necessary to analyze this process through the lens of theoretical developments in the study of ethnicity since the 1960s.

### **Ethnicity in Theory and Practice: Primordialism and Constructivism**

As Wimmer (2008: 973) notes, Max Weber defined ethnicity as "a subjectively felt sense of belonging based on the belief in shared culture and common ancestry." Weber regarded ethnicity as a form of social closure. The strength and significance of ethnicity varies greatly both between individuals and groups, and over time. The presence of conflict tends to increase the level of ethnic affiliation and out-group hostility. Wimmer (2008: 982) cites Smith and Appadurai, who observed that ethnic ambiguity is reduced through violence and war.

It was in the 1960s that a theoretical shift in ethnic analysis developed along two lines: primordialism and constructivism. Primordialism contends that ethnic membership is acquired through birth and represents a cultural given (Wimmer 2008: 971). As Stack (1988: 16) notes, the primordial approach is largely indebted to the works of Geertz and Isaacs. Geertz (1963: 114) details the collective experience as an "enduring structure of primordial identifications" to kin, religions, languages and dialects, and cultural practices. The primordialist view of ethnicity and ethnic conflict argues that ethnoreligious solidarities are deeply rooted in these collective historical experiences. The culture and loyalties expressed by ethnic groups, therefore, are treated as stable and persisting realities (Esman and Rabinovich 1988: 12–13).

Stack (1988: 16) shows that the primordial approach to ethnicity is typically discredited because, “the very term suggests a romantization and mystification of individual and collective behavior.” From the primordialist viewpoint, ethnicity can also be seen as culturally deterministic despite the fact that ethnicity and culture have a complex and multi-direction relationship. Salamandra (2004: 11) argues that ethnicity is “not primordial or static,” but “continually reconstructed in accordance with changing circumstances.”

Primordialism has often been abandoned in favor of the contrasting approach to ethnicity—constructivism. The constructivist approach argues that ethnicity is malleable, the product of an ongoing social process. Ethnicity can thus be seen as having “adaptive” and “opportunistic” qualities (Esman and Rabinovich 1988: 13). Therefore, for constructivists, “ethnic boundaries, culture, and even features of in-group membership are subject to change” (Esman and Rabinovich 1988: 13).

Barth (1969) pioneered the constructivist school of thought with his introduction to a collection of ethnographic case studies in his landmark study, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). Barth’s emphasis on ethnic boundaries highlighted the constructivist viewpoint that ethnicity is adaptive and malleable. No territorial aspect is implied by Barth’s concept of ethnic boundaries. Instead, ethnic boundaries should be thought of as social in nature. Barth (1969: 15) shows how an ethnic boundary between two groups “canalizes social life” and, thus maintains the differences between the two groups. Essentially, if two individuals who are from the same ethnic group interact with one another, their level of interaction is informed by mutual understanding that they are both members of what Allport (1979: 31) refers to as the “in-group.” Since these two people share an ethnicity, they know how to interact due to their shared history and cultural practices. On the other hand, the interaction of two individuals from different ethnic

groups “implies a recognition of limitations on shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgment of value and performance, and a restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest” (Barth 1969: 15). Therefore, interaction along ethnic lines, whether between members of the same ethnic group or members of different groups, helps maintain and perpetuate the ethnic boundary.

Barth (1969) and his collaborators show how ethnic boundaries are maintained, even in situations where two cultures may be culturally indistinguishable or where group membership is impermanent, due to intermarriage, migration, or cultural amalgamation. Many recent scholars of ethnicity including Wimmer (2008) and Salamandra (2004) reflect such constructivist sentiments. Wimmer (2008: 976) elaborates on Barth’s notion of an adaptive ethnic boundary, stating that “the concept of boundary does not imply that the world is composed of clearly defined groups. In fact, ethnic distinctions often have unclear or fuzzy boundaries allowing for individuals to switch identities situationally.” Similarly, Salamandra (2004: 33–34) echoes Barth’s notion of ethnic boundaries in her ethnography on urban Syrian culture:

Actual [ethnoreligious] differences are less important than how and why such differences are produced and maintained. What is significant is the perception of difference, and its social and political uses. Perceived differences are not cultural essences handed down through generations, but rather social constructs which may refer to the past but are very much a product of the present. Social groups invent traditions, formalizing and ritualizing references to the past. Traits which become the basis of group identification may have little or nothing to do with older traditions or affiliations, although pseudo-historical explanations may be invoked to camouflage their inventedness. (Salamandra 33–34)

Expanding upon Barth’s (1969) notion of ethnic boundary, Wimmer (2008: 986) outlines five strategies for ethnic boundary reconstruction—expansion, contraction, inversion, repositioning, and blurring. As has already been alluded in the previous recounting of Syrian history, and will be shown below, many of these features of boundary reconstruction have occurred in the Syria crisis.



Though Barth (1969), Wimmer (2008), and others show clearly that ethnicity is not always composed of Geertz's (1963) "primordial sentiments," Sambanis and Shayo (2013: 299) argue that the ongoing debate between constructivism and primordialism "has ignored the basic fact that ethnicity is *both* malleable *and* strong" (emphasis in original). Wimmer (2008: 970) concedes, showing that primordialist and constructivist theorists have debated the nature of ethnicity, but failed explain its incredible variability.

Either way, the process of ethnic boundary construction outlined by Barth (1969) and elaborated by Wimmer (2008) is important in the context of the apparently increased incidence of ethnic conflict in the last several decades. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, many people assumed that conflict would become increasingly less prevalent. Eller (1999: 1) quotes Mahbun ul Haq, who in 1994 stated that, "the conflicts of the future are more likely to be between people rather than states over issues related to culture, ethnicity or religion." In many parts of the world, this "future" is already a reality. While violent conflicts between states have become less common within the last several decades, open conflict between non-state groups, including ethnic groups, has increased both in frequency and ferocity. Sambanis and Shayo (2013: 294) claim that "ethnic conflicts account for 50–75% of civil wars in the post 1945 period."

Some theorists including Worchel (1999) have correlated a rise in ethnic conflict with modernization, stating that social confusion is a byproduct of modernization and that people have a tendency to latch onto salient group characteristics in the face of fast-paced social change and when "we are faced with situations that are personally ambiguous or threatening" (Worchel 1999: 8). This is not to say that ethnic conflict is a new phenomenon. It is, rather, that the increased level of change has brought about new situations that have resulted in ethnic groups

latching onto the salient group similarities and differences of ethnicity. Still, others have cited a lack of historical perspective by those who are shocked by the horrors occurring around the world (see Eller 1999: 1–5). White (2012: 32–33) claims that ethnic civil wars date back at least to the Roman Empire in 88 B.C.E., and that twenty-eight of the top one-hundred all time deadliest human atrocities have been “ethnic multicides,” with over 74 million dead as a result (White 2012: 549–554).

Whether or not ethnic conflict is truly a historical reality, it has important strategic value in defining in-group membership and inter-group antagonisms. Worchel (1999: 47) shows that competition between ethnic groups might at times be purposefully sought out in order to further dichotomize the two groups, defining “the social lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’.” On this, Schmidt and Schroder (2001) have stated that violence can be understood as a form of interpersonal relations in everyday cultural activity. Schmidt and Schroder (2001: 13–14) argue that “the main intent of the implementation of violence from this perspective lies in its being harnessed to strategies of social closure, of defining ‘us’ and ‘them’ as clearly and diametrically opposed entities.” One other critical aspect is the manipulation of ethnicity by use of violence to reach certain specific outcomes. Sambanis and Shayo (2013: 300) cite de Figueredo and Weingast’s model of ethnic war in which “ethnic ‘entrepreneurs’ use violence to create fear among their co-ethnics so that they can manipulate them and mobilize them in a fight that serves the elites’ interests and political aspirations.” Put simply, elites use violence to construct antagonistic ethnic identities. The utilities of ethnic violence show again that ethnicity is certainly malleable.

Though it has been shown earlier that Syrian ethnoreligious group identity is deeply rooted in the past, it is also very malleable. The process of ethnic boundary creation has been an

important strategy utilized by ethnic elites during the Syrian Civil War. Such boundary construction has two correlating functions: (1) to establish in-group membership—“us”—and, (2) to define the alien enemy—or “them”. In this way, Barth’s notion of ethnic boundary canalizes social life—dividing the world into “us” and “them” and offering scripts of action—even in the course of a bloody civil war.

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, the constructed Arab character of Syria began to collapse. For many Syrians, the “Arab Spring” included only those who identified closest with the “Arab” label—typically the Sunni majority. Many minorities feared majority Sunni domination and therefore did not join the protest movement. Seeing this, Bashar al-Assad recast loyalties based on the divisions already present in Syrian society. In simultaneous processes of expansion, inversion, repositioning and blurring of boundaries (see Wimmer 2008: 986–989), Assad has redefined in-group membership in order to exclude Sunnis, while simultaneously portraying them as the enemy.

As Assad further consolidated his response to domestic unrest, he implemented strategies of “blurring boundaries” and “expansion” by courting ethnoreligious minorities in order to form a minoritarian loyalist alliance. After protests began in February 2011, the official state narrative portrayed the Assad regime as the ultimate defender of Syria’s ethnoreligious minorities, and early on, Assad launched a campaign to show how much his regime had taken care of minorities. Droz-Vincent (2014: 41) writes that the regime displayed “a unitary national (*watani*) cadre that connected minorities to the regime,” constructing the “*tahaluf al-aqilliyyat* or ‘the alliance of minorities.’ ” On Syrian State Television, Shia sheiks and Christian priests were shown praying for fallen Alawite martyrs (Starr 2012: 44). Ziter (2013: 125) wrote that “by including a two-minute segment on a service for martyrs at the Cathedral of St. George in Damascus, the

broadcast emphasized support for the regime in minority communities, implicitly referencing concerns for minority rights and safety in a post-Assad Syria.” In this way, the Assad regime sought to blur boundaries between ethnoreligious minorities (see Wimmer 2008: 289), and “create a more encompassing boundary by grouping existing categories into a new, expanded category” (Wimmer: 2008: 987), thereby imposing a united pro-regime national sentiment. At the same time, the regime looked to co-opt minority groups by placing them in positions of power, as Assad began replacing Alawite government officials with Christians. Syria's ethnoreligious minorities, in a process of “repositioning,” had been “summoned for a stand against the Sunni wave” (Ajami 2012: 115).

According to Ziter (2013: 125), these images of minority unity were not enough to convince many Syrians. The Assad regime took further steps by explicitly warning of Sunni domination. In many parts of Syria, the security forces and army handed out guns and sandbags to ethnoreligious minorities, at the same time spreading rumors of Islamist gangs (Starr 2012: 168). According to Yazbik (2012: 40), a pro-opposition Alawite, the Syrian regime has been known to spread rumors that Sunnis had attacked Alawite businesses and that they were going to burn everything in sight. The Assad regime continued to broadcast graphic images of violence directed toward ethnoreligious minorities, “fanning fear of a future of national disintegration rife with Christian dead” (Ziter 2013: 125). This strategy seemed to work, and even the patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, Ignace IV plead to Syrian minorities that “the regime was preferable to the sort of order that might emerge out of the upheaval” (Ajami 2012: 115).

The regime also reached out to previously marginalized groups in its reworking of ethnoreligious boundaries, a process of “inversion” alluded to by Wimmer (2008: 988). Prior to the uprising, Arab national sentiment had been elevated to the point that Syrian Kurds were

sidelined by the Ba’th Party under Hafez al-Assad (Starr 2012: 35). “There had been serious Kurdish protests against the government in the past over issues of citizenship and cultural identity,” notes Lesch (2012: 83). In March 2004, anger erupted in Qamishli, and Syrian security forces swiftly responded, killing thirty Kurds and injuring over one-thousand (Starr 2012: 36). When the uprising began, this anger was still seething under the surface. In addition to past grievances with the Syrian regime, Kurds sympathized to some degree with the Sunni majority opposition due to the shared religion. In May and June of 2011, anti-regime protests took place in many Kurdish areas of Syria.

There was, however, a tangible level of ambivalence toward wholeheartedly joining the Arab protesters. Starr (2012: 39) reports on Syrian Kurd who stated that the Syrian uprising “is an Arab uprising and we are not Arab.” Fears of instability and bloodshed brought on by an Islamist-dominated post-Assad Syria temper resentment for the Assad regime (Borneman 2007: xxvi). Sensing Kurdish reluctance, the Assad regime immediately made overtures to Syrian Kurds (Droz-Vincent 2014: 41). On March 30, 2011, only two weeks after the outbreak of protests, Bashar al-Assad announced in his first speech to parliament since 2007 that around three-hundred thousand Kurds were to be granted Syrian citizenship (Starr 2012: 5). The Syrian regime also made the *Nawrooz* (the Kurdish New Year) a national holiday (Lesch 2012: 83–84). These two moves are significant in that they offered the non-Arab Kurds an official place within a framework previously dominated by Arab nationalism. Assad’s offer to the Kurds did not resonate as much as it did with other ethnoreligious groups such as the Christians, Alawites, and Druze. But by early 2014, the Kurdish position within the opposition was less clear and clashes between the Kurds and ISIL led Kurds to declare their autonomy in Kurdish-majority areas of Syria’s northeast (Syria Needs Analysis Project 1–4).

The Syrian regime has also tried to limit, discredit, and deny the existence of anti-Assad opposition members from the country's ethnoreligious minority groups. Yazbik (2012: 28) writes that those Alawites who supported the opposition "were subjected to additional oppression by the security forces, as a means of intimidation; their reputation would be smeared. Some of them were arrested; others would be warned against creating moral scandals." Yazbik is herself the daughter of a well-known Alawite family and pro-opposition. For supporting the opposition, Yazbik is described as "traitor to the sect" (2012: 50), enduring death threats, repeated kidnapping and detention, and physical and sexual abuse at the hands of pro-government *shabbiha* security services. Similarly, when Basel Shehadeh, a Christian videographer was martyred filming anti-regime videos, the regime took action to stop his story from spreading by forbidding funerary services for Shehadeh. On this, Ziter (2013: 133) wrote that "a regime that asserts that it alone protects minority sects from a Muslim blood bath cannot tolerate images of Christian and Muslims together mourning a victim of state violence." Starr (2012: 32) writes that within Syrian Christian communities, any Christian "who questioned the actions of the regime was castigated" and that "Christians have disowned elements of their communities that have displayed anti-regime rhetoric." These tactics keep government loyalists secular while constructing a homogenous Sunni opposition.

By highlighting the secular nature of the government, Assad has carved a heterogeneous support base out of Syrian diversity. At the same time, Assad has worked to portray Syria's majority Sunni population as the enemy. The rhetoric employed by the Syrian regime represented the initially peaceful protesters of the Syrian uprising as Islamist terrorists working for al-Qaeda. In truth, the initial protests were led by average citizens from all of Syria's ethnoreligious backgrounds. These protests were secular and united in their demands, chief of

which was the downfall of the regime and transition to democracy. Facing a unified opposition, Bashar al-Assad worked quickly to divide Syrians along ethnic and religious lines and ensure the coalition of minorities, which would form his support base. The creation of the alien other was requisite in defining this loyalty base.

The Syrian regime “moved to brand a peaceful and cross-sectarian protest movement as a terrorist campaign led by Islamist extremists” (Heydemann 2013: 62). Early in the protest movement, the Syrian regime repeatedly asserted that militant Jihadists organized the protests and were responsible for civilian deaths (Ziter 2013: 119). This narrative continued as the violence escalated. Starr (2012: 51) wrote that, “the regime has obliquely used the threat of Islamic fundamentalism to draw the country’s minorities to its side by repeatedly claiming during the unrest that armed Islamist gangs were responsible for all the deaths of civilians and hundreds of army and security personnel.” Syrian State Television broadcast numerous alleged confessions of captured “terrorists” to reinforce what Heydemann (2013: 64) calls the “uprising-as-Sunni-terrorism narrative.” The regime has also associated the uprising with terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda:

The official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) television and websites have prominently displayed very gruesome and graphic pictures after chaotic car bombings in civilian-populated areas near military and security facilities. Recurrent unidentified explosions have fueled a context of fear and indiscriminate violence, with the regime presenting itself as the only bulwark against the threat of civil war. (Droz-Vincent 2014: 46–47)

In fact, there is some evidence that the Assad regime has even worked to produce an Islamist or Jihadi opposition. Droz-Vincent (2014: 55) wrote that “at the onset of the uprising, dozens of radical Islamists were liberated from prison by the Asad regime under the guise of a ‘presidential amnesty’ for prisoners in May 2011.”

The actual presence of extremist rebel groups in Syria since mid-2012 has only fit regime rhetoric in its claim to wage “a war against terror” (Droz-Vincent 2014: 55). Heydemann (2013) argues that the transformations of the Syrian opposition since protests erupted in 2011 have been astounding. Using Wimmer’s (2008) strategies of ethnic boundary construction, “what began as a peaceful protest movement calling for democratic change and defended by moderate armed groups [is now a] militantly Islamist armed movement (Heydemann 70)”. Droz-Vincent (2014: 55) notes the sectarian tilt of the armed opposition, stating that many groups bear Sunni Islamic names such as *Islah*, *Ansar al-Nabi*, *Umma Islamiyya*, *Liwa’ al-Umma*, *Katibat al-Muhajirin*, and *Jaysh al-Mahajirin wa-l-Ansar*.

Either way, the brutality of the Assad regime is more easily justified when Assad claims he is fighting al-Qaeda. Heydemann (2013: 70) wrote that “extremism, polarization, and fragmentation are much easier targets for the regime than peaceful protesters seeking constitutional and economic reforms.” The regime has coalesced its minority power base, perpetuating divisions based on ethnoreligious sectarianism “for the purpose of creating mechanisms of loyalty” (Droz-Vincent 2014: 40).

This threat of Islamic extremism has played a role in continuing minority support for the regime—minority groups fear reprisals if Assad falls. Droz-Vincent (2014) noted that in 2011, many minorities were sympathetic with the opposition. However, since 2012, increased uncertainties and the “uprising-as-Sunni-terrorism narrative” have led minorities to remain supportive of the Assad “under the hypothesis strongly suggested by the regime that they fare better under a minority Assad regime rather than a majoritarian (Sunni) regime” (Droz-Vincent 2014: 42).



While the Assad regime has claimed it has been battling radical Islamists, Jihadists, terrorists, or al-Qaeda, it has instead employed targeted ethnoreligiously-motivated killings against Sunni civilians. Heydemann (2013: 62) wrote that “the Assad regime has promoted exclusionary sectarian mobilization to reinforce defensive solidarity among the regime’s core social base” of ethnoreligious minorities. This ethno-sectarian mobilization of minorities is partly due to the character of the Syrian military and security services. The military is made of “an almost entirely Alawite officer corps that is stubbornly loyal to the Assads, willing to use every weapon it can” including cluster bombs, ballistic missiles, helicopter gunships, and chemical munitions (Heydemann 2013: 66). Lesch (2012: 50) shows that the fate of the Syrian military—and by extension the Alawites and other Syrian ethnoreligious minorities—is closely tied to that of the regime.

The Syrian regime has relied upon the most loyal divisions in the military—particularly elite Alawite-dominated army units such as the Fourth Armored Division, the Third Corps, and the Republican Guard—to spearhead the crackdowns in areas of unrest (Lesch 2012: 51). In such divisions, the chain of command is based upon the Alawite kinship network (Droz-Vincent 2014: 39). Similarly, the regime has relied upon *shabiha* militias, integrating these groups into the National Defense Forces. *Shabiha* described by Heydemann (2013: 66) as “informal networks of nonstate actors, organized on the basis of familial ties, sectarian affinity, or simply mercenary arrangements, and cultivated by regime elites over the years to provide a range of (often illegal) functions.”

The regime has relied upon *shabiha* groups to carry out some of the worst sectarian atrocities of the civil war against Sunni civilians (Droz-Vincent 2014: 39). Heydemann (2013: 66–67) wrote that the *shabiha* “serve as shock troops, defend Alawite and minority communities

against opposition attacks, terrorize and brutalize Sunni communities, assist the regime in controlling army units to prevent desertions and defections, and fight alongside the armed forces against opposition-held areas.” *Shabiha* militias have been responsible for what Heydemman (2013: 65) calls “partial sectarian cleansing in rural areas,” and Rabil (2013: 1) defines “irrefutable precursors of sectarian cleansing in Houla, Qubeir and other mixed areas in Syria.” Droz-Vincent (2014: 56) states that *shabiha* have been “implicated in a series of gruesome massacres which the regime ignored or implicitly condoned.” Such massacres have occurred across Syria in predominately Sunni areas.

#### **Part Four: Discussion and Conclusion**

The nature of Syrian unity, as shown in this study, remains an unanswered and elusive question. Borneman (2007: xxvi) notes that “without affirmation of this secular dynasty, the one symbol of Syrian unity, there is little that holds the Syrian people together.” Rabil (2012: 1) concluded that the civil war in Syria is now primarily “over consolidating sectarian cantonization, or the creation of sub-national units, each of which is dominated by a predominant sect.” The potential for Syrian national disintegration is exacerbated by intergroup fighting. Carpenter (2013: 6) noted that “Syria’s ethnoreligious strife increased the probability of a fragmented Syrian state. Assad’s Alawite-dominated military already shows signs of trying to establish an Alawite-Christian redoubt in the mountainous western part of the country.”

Already, it can be seen how the regime strategy of boundary construction based upon minority solidarity and Sunni majority exclusion has had an effect on our understanding of the Syrian Civil War. The ethnoreligious boundaries drawn by the Syrian Assad regime have been noted as obstacles by those seeking a resolution to the civil war (De Blij 2013). Calls for Syria’s

partition are taking into account these recently constructed social boundaries, which threaten to memorialize the hatreds between Syrians for generations to come.

Rabil (2013: 2) argues that the regime is “redrawing the borders of its Alawi stronghold to include the areas in the provinces of Idlib, Hama, and Homs (in which sizable Shi’a, Ismaili and Christian minorities reside). Already, a significant number of minorities from different parts of the country have moved to these areas, including Latakia and Tartous.” Similarly, Heydemann (2013: 64) reports that Homs now has many fewer Sunnis, while Damascus, Tartus, Latakia, and Hama have seen large inflows of displaced persons. There have been many calls for Syria’s partition, much like that of former Yugoslavia after its bloody ethnic civil war in the 1990s. Figure 6 (below) depicts just one call for partition with three proposed states—an Alawite state, a Sunni state, and a Kurdish state. Note that the “Alawite state” includes those provinces where boundaries are being redrawn as cited in Rabil (2013).

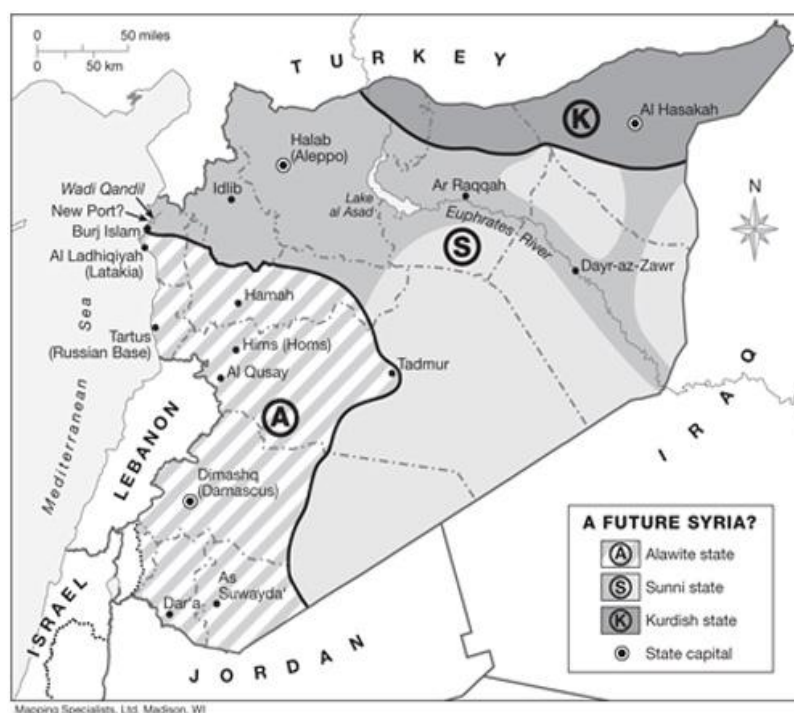


Figure 6. De Blij’s (2013) proposed partition of Syria.

In Syria, the Ba'th coup united all Arab Syrians ("us") against the non-Arabs (the Jews and Kurds, or "them"). In 1963, Ba'th Party political and military officials came from every Syrian ethnoreligious group except for the Kurds. Following the bloodless coup by Hafez al-Assad, and the subsequent purges by the Ba'th Party, the Assad regime began populating the army units exclusively with Alawite generals. While there were some Sunnis in political positions, there were many minorities including Christians and Druze. The highest level political authority was exclusively Alawite. After the Syrian uprising began, Bashar al-Assad employed strategic use of violence and rhetoric to restructure the Syrian Arab ethnic boundary. Though representing the majority of Syrians, Sunnis were now characterized as the alien other. In portraying Syrian Sunnis as criminals, radical Islamists, al-Qaeda linked terrorists, and foreign jihadists, Bashar al-Assad was sending a strong message. When this rhetoric is considered along with the Assad regime's indiscriminate use of force against Sunni civilian-populated areas, the extensive torture and massacres committed by Alawite paramilitary *shabihha* against Sunnis, as well as state-perpetuation of sectarian tension and fears, it becomes clear that Bashar al-Assad is reconstructing Syrian ethnic boundaries. In his new calculus, "us" is represented by the "coalition of minorities," and "them" by the Sunnis, portrayed as radical Islamist, foreign-backed, genocidal, jihadist al-Qaeda members. These strategies of ethnoreligious boundary construction will have long-term and potentially devastating effects in Syria. The future looks grim, even if Assad leave office by choice or via rebel victory, both highly unlikely scenarios.

## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. When did you last live in/visit Syria, do you still have family living there, and when did you leave Syria?
2. Can you talk a little bit about where you are from and what your family members do in Syria?
3. How long did you attend school in Syria, and how does it compare to your experiences in the US (if they're currently going to school in the US). What was the course of study? Did religious education play a part in your studies, and from what age?
4. What is the most important way that you and your family identify yourselves? [religious, national, ethnic, etc.]
5. How do you and your family identify yourselves with respect to religious and/or other affiliations, such as ethnic, regional, tribal, etc.
6. Can you tell me about some of the unique features of your own religious, ethnic, tribal group, and how you and your family expressed your affiliation with that group? [ex: through religious activities, other celebrations, foods, cultural traditions, intermarriage, residential endogamy, etc]
7. What makes your own social group different from some of the other groups that are found in Syria?
8. Did your family live in a religiously, ethnically, or otherwise mixed neighborhood (town, village, etc)? What groups lived there?
  - a. If it was a mixed neighborhood (village, town, etc), did people from these different groups tend to get along?
9. Have there been changes in your neighborhood (village, town, etc), in the ability of people to get along since the recent conflicts?
10. Do you have/have you had friends from other groups? Are there any groups that you would not be friendly with? Can you explain why?
11. Can you talk about the current conflict in Syria has affected you and your family personally?
12. Do you support any particular side in the conflict, and why?
13. In general, how do you and/or people from your ethnic, religious, regional, etc. group feel about [the revolution, Bashar al-Assad, al-Nusra front, etc.]?
14. Do you think there are ways to resolve the current conflict?

## Appendix B

## Bridgewater State University Informed Consent Document

**Project Title:** *The Construction of Identity Groups in Syria: Religious and Ethnic Loyalties in the Syrian Civil War*

**Researchers:** Principal investigator: Sandra Faiman-Silva, Professor of Anthropology, Anthropology Dept., Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA 02325 (508) 531-2369

Co-principal investigator: Elliott Rousseau, Anthropology Dept., Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA 02325 (508) 513-5816

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Bridgewater State University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

I, Elliott Rousseau, will be the primary contact for this project, which is described below. Please ask me any questions you have to help you understand the project. If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign below in the space provided. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

1. **Nature and Purpose of the Project:** This project will describe and analyze the Syrian Civil War, focusing on aspects of religious and ethnic identity, how loyalties are drawn during times of conflict, and methods employed by interest groups to distinguish their group from another.
2. **Explanation of the Procedures:** I will conduct a semi-formal interview asking questions about your life in Syria, including your community, education, social upbringing, interaction with other groups, direct or indirect experiences of the recent conflict, and opinions regarding recent events in Syria.
3. **Discomfort and Risks:** I may ask questions about your social status, encounters with other community members and social groups, and issues pertaining to religious and ethnic groups. Additionally, I may ask you to share opinions which remind you of emotionally difficult times. You may decline to reply at any time if you feel uncomfortable with questions asked.
4. **Benefits:** This project will help us understand how much or little factors of religion and ethnicity play into the conflict in Syria. You may benefit personally by having the chance to share your experiences and opinions.
5. **Confidentiality:** Every effort will be made to keep your personal information confidential. Your confidentiality will be maintained by the use of pseudonyms and recording data without the possibility of identification.

**Refusal/Withdrawal:**

Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Thank you very much.

By signing below I am indicating that I understand that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential unknown risks.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principle Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Co-principle Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Any questions regarding the conduct of the project, questions pertaining to your rights as a participant, or research related to injury, should be brought to the attention of the IRB Administrator at (508) 531-1242.

Any questions about the conduct of the research project should be brought to the attention of the principal investigator: Sandra Faiman-Silva, Ph.D. or the Co-Principal investigator, Elliott Rousseau.

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### Interview Subjects

- Ali, author's interview, December 02 2013
- Amir, author's interview, November 18 2013
- Hassan, author's interview, January 17 2014
- Sabirah, author's interview, January 19 2014